

**The Wheelwright Fellowship 2007**  
**Carlos Arnaiz**

**Title:**

**Four Experiments in Urbanism: The Modern *University City* in Latin America.**

**Abstract:**

The modern Latin American university campus presents the opportunity to articulate an alternative vision for architecture and urbanism. Established and built at a peculiar historical moment—when professional confidence merged with a progressive view of nation-building—the modernist campus in Latin America re-imagined the university as a laboratory for urbanism where architecture could function as an imperfect but affecting utopia. The designers of these campuses channeled an extraordinary optimism regarding the power of form to create a space separate from the colonial city that surrounded them. The capacity to break with history by tapping into the ideological subterfuge of modernism enabled these architects to reconfigure local spatial practices such as the city square and combine them with radically new ideas regarding movement, nature and representation. The architectural imaginary that resulted from the modern Latin American campus produced an unprecedented repository of design strategies.

As part of the Wheelwright Travelling Fellowship, I will formulate a blueprint re-thinking the Modern Latin American University Campus as a radical experiment in architecture and urbanism. I will study four campuses that were realized between the years 1930-1955 and whose architectural legacies present the strongest evidence of a clear ideological position regarding architecture in the city. The four campuses are: The *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de México* (UNAM) in México City, México; the *Universidad Central de Venezuela* in Caracas, Venezuela; the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia Sede Bogotá* in Bogotá, Colombia; and the *Cidade Universitaria* in São Paulo, Brasil. The scale and patriotic ambition of these four campuses distinguish them as the best candidates through which to study the phenomenon of the *University City*. All were built in the most populous cities at the time and have remained semi-autonomous urban agglomerations that are regarded as cities unto themselves. Their spatio-political independence has been critical to creation and understanding of public space in Latin America.

The research will begin with an in-depth analysis of how these four modernist campuses projected the model of a city within a city. I will establish a set of key concepts by which the modernist architectural idiom was transformed and expanded. The architectural legacy of these campuses will be treated as a loosely structured encyclopedia of concepts to help think through the effects of modernization on the postwar city. Terms such as *hard* and *soft scape*, *outdoor* and *indoor*, *continuous* and *discontinuous* will be reexamined under the lens of these initiatives. This research will culminate in a publication that considers the architectural implications of designing a university that openly engages in a conversation with its metropolitan context and invents new design strategies in the process.

## **Five Design Strategies in the University City:**

I am offering five working concepts through which to articulate the design legacy of the modern Latin American *University City*. Each concept will be used as a frame to assess the ways in which modernist design strategies were reinvented and necessarily transformed into an idealized form of urbanism that was then exported to their “host” cities. Because these concepts are by definition provocations-in-process, they are offered with a blend of tentativeness and confidence. Their final form will depend on the results of the research I will conduct as wheelwright Travelling fellow.

### **A. Dispersed City**

The *University City* as architectural idea is inextricably bound to the problem of order. Designing buildings that are themselves containers of knowledge supposes that the architecture of the campus is to some extent analogous to accepted schemas for organizing knowledge about the world. The architects behind each of these four campuses were keenly aware of the organizational potential of their work. There has been extensive scholastic research into the historical references of each campus. Instead of looking for a typological forbearer, this proposal assumes that each campus represents a new plan for the creation of a partial urban order out of disparate parts. Design strategies involving the organization of fragments into a whole such as repetition, rotation or transfiguration will form the basis for an analysis of the architectural project of the *University City*.

### **B. Hard and Soft Scope**

In each of these four campuses, the definition of architectural space is inseparable from its characterization as either “hard” paved zones or “soft” regions for the cultivation of gardens and athletic play. The architectural experience of the campus as city becomes the product of the interplay of these two disparate atmospheres. The research will look into the different hybrid forms this interplay produces and speculate on their larger effect as an algorithm of indoor and outdoor rooms. Spaces defined by modernist devices, such as the “landform” *piloti* developed by Vilanova Artigas in the architecture building at the University of São Paulo, will be reevaluated under this classification regime. The research will look for episodes of enclosure and their natural exceptions in an attempt to define the condition of both landscape and urbanism as a finely crafted sequence of hard and soft zones in the *University City*.

### **C. Vertical Abstractions**

The predominance of the modernist tower and slab on the four campuses makes the elevation a natural design problem. The enormous scale of these facades and the fact that there were few regional precedents of such monumental vertical surfaces further deepens the predicament of the elevation. The symbolic value of the façade-mural has been heavily discussed in studies of the UNAM in Mexico. In addition, the history of social unrest and political revolution in Latin American has left a literal trace on these vertical surfaces in the form of graffiti. Instead of reworking these studies, this research attempt to look at the aesthetic concept of non-representation and the ways in which the vertical surfaces at these four campuses introduced this modernist visual paradigm to the region. I will catalogue instances in

which the vertical surface produced moments of abstraction and difference in relationship to the condition of the surface in the colonial city. Topical themes such as the dematerialization of the façade will be compared to the development of a vocabulary of screens and other devices for the dissolution of the perception of solidity. The hope is that the research might find that buildings on the architects of these campuses experimented campuses with ornament and representation in ways the presaged and maybe even surpassed current practice.

#### **D. Connective Architecture**

All four campuses were designed during the second automobile age—a period in which the architectural reality of circulation assumed a new infrastructural scale and complexity. The ideal modernist city accommodates different forms of transportation and enables the free movement of car-bound individuals. Parking lots proliferate and roadways are widened in sketches by Corbusier and Hilberseimer. Site in the modern Latin American university campus acquires the paradoxical charter of being a zone of passage as much as a place of learning. The large-scale territorial nature of these campuses opens the potential to think of this pragmatic exigency as an opportunity to redirect the flow of the city as it passes through the University. This formal and programmatic commitment to infrastructure offers the opportunity to theorize the *University City* as having re-engaged its surrounding urban field through as a physical and psychic router of people and information. In fact, there exists the possibility that the re-conceptualization of architecture as urban infrastructure helped set the stage for the extraordinary experimentation with structural form as in Felix Candela's designs for the *UNAM* in Mexico or Affonso Eduardo Riedy's work on the *Cidade Universitaria* in São Paulo, Brasil .

#### **E. Post-occupation & the Other City**

Finally, the study will come to terms with the unavoidable transformation enacted on these campuses through the last five or six decades of occupation. The intention is to open a conversation between modernist space and academic life. In doing so, the project can avoid the pitfalls of an exclusively retrospective analysis and acquire a projective capacity with respect to the future of university planning and design as an exercise in radical urbanism and architecture. As a conclusion to the research, I will attempt to use each campus as kind of mirror to reflect back on the existing urban condition of their "host" cities and observe how far and deep the architectural tactics of the *University City* have proliferated.

## Product

The goal is to produce either a book or a pamphlet that documents the work and advances the proposition that these four campuses hold enormous potential for the architecture profession as repositories of unformulated design concepts regarding architecture and urbanism. The structure and form of the publication will be an integral part of the message. The intention is to convey through the graphic organization of the research material the specific variety of design intelligence buried in each *University City*.

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